

Separating the wood from the trees

As the “ping-pong” continues between the two Houses of Parliament over the amendments to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, it is easy to end up very confused, bogged down by a mass of detail.

Part of the problem is separating the wood from the trees. Some items of news, touted as major developments, could better be described as “going round in circles”. More of the same, in other words. Take, for example, the “Backstop” plan announced by HM Government two weeks ago – a temporary customs agreement which, so it believed, would solve the Irish border problem. Any gambler would have been justified in betting that the proposals would amount to nothing new and would promptly be rejected by the EU. This, of course, is exactly what happened. In his usual polite, but measured way, Michel Barnier dismissed the UK plans. Here is his speech. For those readers not wanting to read it in full, this short extract, where he contrasts the EU’s “backstop” proposals (which have been deemed unacceptable by a number of pro-Brexit supporters in the UK) with HM Government’s, is sufficient to show just how wide of the mark our side still is:-

But let me recall that our backstop provides answers to each of these questions.

It provides specific solutions to the unique situation of Northern Ireland.

The UK is taking a different angle, however. It is looking for a UK-wide solution.

Let me be clear: our backstop cannot be extended to the whole UK.

Why? Because it has been designed for the specific situation of Northern Ireland.

What does it do? On customs, Northern Ireland would form part of our customs territory. What is feasible with a territory the size of Northern Ireland is not necessarily feasible with the whole UK....

So it's back to the drawing board with the clock continuing to tick.

If further evidence was needed of how good life can be outside the EU, even for signatories of the EEA agreement, this documentary on Liechtenstein is worth listening to. It includes an interview with the country's Prince. If anyone should know how well this small country is functioning outside the EU but yet within the EEA, its leader must surely be the man.

Such is the muddle at the heart of government that some serious commentators are now claiming that we will never achieve Brexit. The forthcoming European Council looks to be a bad time for Mrs May. On the one hand, she is nowhere near to coming up with any sort of agreement to which the EU will agree. On the other hand, some of her backbenchers are threatening to bring down the government over fears that Brexit will be botched and disaster ensue.

The standard of reporting by the press when it comes to Brexit has left much to be desired, Looking at things more objectively, the two problems the government is facing are closely related. There are unquestionably a few determined "wreckers" who have not come to terms with the Brexit vote and never will. There are also many remain-voting MPs who have accepted the verdict of the referendum but will only go along with the government's plans if they are confident that the country will not suffer economic turmoil and dislocation. They, unlike their more gung-ho Brexit colleagues, are aware

of the problems which we, among others have highlighted if we have to crash out of the EU without a deal and bringing down the government is the only weapon left in their arsenal.

We have long been saying that only a crisis will bring a change of direction. Thankfully, the government's complete lack of ability to address the outstanding issues, let alone throw its weight behind a solution which will be acceptable to Parliament, makes such a crisis increasingly likely. If it leads to a reconsideration of something like the EFTA route, this could actually prove beneficial, detaching from the hard core head-banging remainiacs those pragmatic MPs who are prepared, in spite of their own personal preference, to support the people's democratic decision with a sensible Brexit and thus ensure that we do finally leave the EU next March.